

Diversity in Facilitation Learning Day

What difference does who we are (in terms of the groups we belong to) make to how we facilitate and what comes at us from the groups we facilitate?

On July 8 I will be facilitating a learning day for AoF on diversity in facilitation. I thought it would be helpful, for myself and for people who are considering attending, for me to outline some of the thoughts that have led me to want to spend a day on this subject, and what I mean by 'Diversity in Facilitation'!

Let me start with two examples:

I remember working with a young woman who worked in a large engineering company and as part of her role facilitated Risk Assessment meetings, something that had to be done but for which attendees were usually reluctant. I was struck by (amongst other issues) what it was like for a young woman to be facilitating a group of mainly older men to do something they didn't really want to do; and how different dynamics might have been in play if she had been an older man. Here are some examples of the sorts of possible dynamics I am thinking of:

- Would it in some ways be easier for someone more like the participants to connect and build trust? but the danger then is of collusion.
- Would older male participants be patronising towards a younger woman? And how might she deal with this?
- Would the men feel like they should take care of the facilitator, would paternal protective feelings emerge that get in the way of them being completely honest about their thoughts and feelings?
- There is likely to be an extra need for her to project self-confidence and to gain the confidence of the participants, without resorting to hierarchy.

Example 2: I'm a diversity trainer and a 60 year old man. There is one particular organisation that I do work for, who recruit a lot of people in their 20s and 30s, the majority women. As my diversity course is part of the programme of induction courses they do after recruitment, I am usually, as a 60-year old man, carrying out training on diversity with most, and on some occasions all, the participants being much younger women.

So what if I am a 60 year old man training young women? Well I think it is important that I am not tempted into the rather attractive role of older guru dispensing wisdom to young acolytes. I caricature it rather, but I do think it is even *more* important than usual in this situation that I value participants' experience and their own wisdom. And what are their expectations of me? Does my age and gender give me more presence and credibility in their eyes? Or just imply that I am likely to be out of touch (if I was ever in touch in the first place!).

You might ask whether, as facilitators, these dynamics matter? Surely it is facilitator skill that matters rather than who you are and who the participants are?

My answer would be that it is another dynamic to which attention should be paid not less or more important than the many other dynamics that go on within groups. But also I would say that it is one that is often out of awareness. In my experience as a participant in facilitator training, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is often considered a different area from facilitation, and there is very little crossover.

Diversity is a subtle but powerful dynamic and not seeing it means that we limit our options and awareness of what is happening in the room and the options open to us as facilitators.

These two examples are about gender, but I would contend that whatever group you belong to, these dynamics are there and need to be considered. What is it like for a black facilitator in a white or mostly white group? Might participants unconsciously underestimate the facilitator's expertise and experience? Might participants over-compensate by being especially 'nice' to the facilitator in an inauthentic way? What difference does it make for that facilitator if the group is more diverse? And so on for other groups we are all members of.

So far I have written more about what might come at the facilitator from the group. But it works the other way as well, we all take our own material into the group. I'm Jewish and a key part of Jewish material runs: "Will I be accepted into the (non-Jewish) group or will I be thrown out". This can apply to whatever group I am in, social groups as well – but I do recognise that if I am facilitating a group that I am finding difficult and feeling unsafe in, these feelings can come up strongly and this old distress can get in the way of clear thinking in my facilitation.

Incidentally if I am facilitating a group of Jews it doesn't mean that the stuff isn't there – it's just different material, a different dynamic for me to be aware of!

What makes diversity central to facilitation for me is that learning to work with difference is key to high performing groups and organisations AND that learning to work with one's own identity in its fullest sense is a key to our development as facilitators.

I'm very interested in these dynamics in groups and how they affect our facilitation, and on July 8 I'd really like to explore them with you and find out what your experience is. I aim to come with questions and insights rather than answers and hope to raise our awareness about another aspect of group dynamics which perhaps is too often ignored.

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